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Help Your Child Learn to Write Well

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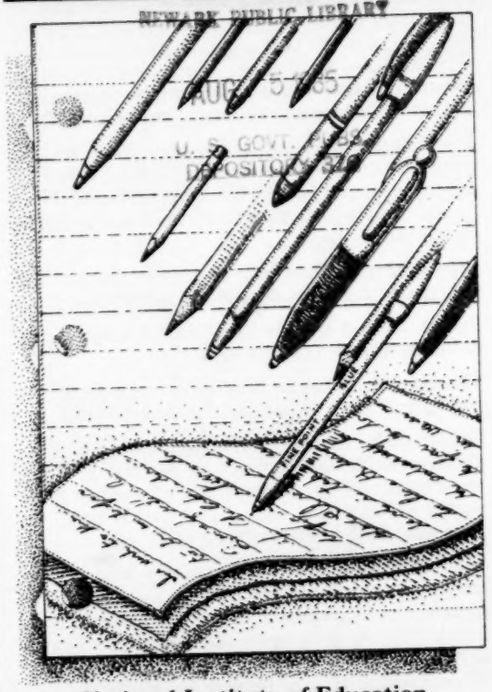

National Institute of Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, D.C. 20208

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"We must make sure we have put our children first and that their education is a top priority."
President Ronald Reagan

Should you help your child with writing?

Yes, if you want your child to:

- Do well in school
- Enjoy self-expression
- Become more self-reliant

You know how important writing will be to your child's life. It will be important from first-grade through college and throughout adulthood.

Writing is:

Practical. Most of us make lists, jot down reminders, and write notes and instructions at least occasionally.

Job-Related. Professional and white-collar workers write frequently—preparing memos, letters, briefing papers, sales reports, articles, research reports, proposals, and the like. Most workers do **some** writing on the job.

Stimulating. Writing helps to provoke thoughts and to organize them logically and concisely.

Social. Most of us write thank-you notes and letters to friends at least now and then.

Therapeutic. It can be helpful to express feelings in writing that cannot be expressed so easily by speaking.

Unfortunately, **many schools are unable to give children sufficient instruction in writing.** There are various reasons: teachers aren't trained to teach writing skills, writing classes may be too large, it's often difficult to measure writing skills, etc.

Study after study shows that students' writing lacks clarity, coherence, and organization. Only a few students can write persuasive essays or competent business letters. As many as one out of four have serious writing difficulties. And students say they like writing less and less as they go through school.

That's why the National Institute of Education (NIE) suggests that you help your child with writing. NIE believes you, a parent, can make a big difference. You can use helping strategies that are simple and fun. You can use them to help your child learn to write well—and to enjoy doing it! This leaflet tells you how.

Things To Know

WRITING is more than putting words on paper. It's a final stage in the complex process of communicating that begins with **thinking.** Writing is an especially important stage in communication, the intent being to leave no room for doubt. Has any country ratified a verbal treaty?

One of the first means of communication for your child is through drawing. Do encourage the child to draw and to discuss his/her drawings. Ask questions: What is the boy doing? Does the house look like ours? Can you tell a story about this picture?

Most children's basic speech patterns are formed by the time they enter school. By that time children speak clearly, recognize most letters of the alphabet, and may try to write. Show an interest in, and ask questions about, the things your child says, draws, and may try to write.

Writing well requires:

- **Clear thinking.** Sometimes the child needs to have his/her memory refreshed about a past event in order to write about it.
- **Sufficient time.** Children may have 'stories in their heads' but need time to think them through and write them down. School class periods are often not long enough.
- **Reading.** Reading can stimulate a child to write about his/her own family or school life. If your child reads good books, (s)he will be a better writer.
- **A meaningful task.** A child needs meaningful, not artificial writing tasks. You'll find suggestions for such tasks in the section, "Things To Do."
- **Interest.** All the time in the world won't help if there is nothing to write, nothing to say. Some of the reasons for writing include: sending messages, keeping records, expressing feelings, or relaying information.
- **Practice.** And more practice.
- **Revising.** Students need experience in revising their work—i.e., seeing what they can do to make it clearer, more descriptive, more concise, etc.

Pointers for Parents

IN helping your child to learn to write well, remember that your goal is to make writing easier and more enjoyable.

Provide a place. It's important for a child to have a good place to write—a desk or table with a smooth, flat surface and good lighting.

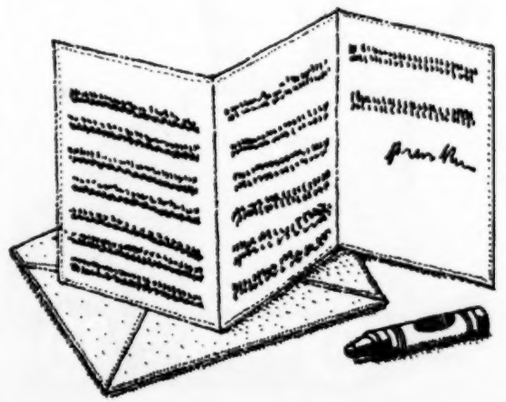
Have the materials. Provide plenty of paper—lined and unlined—and things to write with, including pencils, pens, and crayons.

Allow time. Help your child spend time thinking about a writing project or exercise. Good writers do a great deal of thinking. Your child may dawdle, sharpen a pencil, get papers ready, or look up the spelling of a word. Be patient—your child may be thinking.

Respond. Do respond to the ideas your child expresses verbally or in writing. Make it clear that you are interested in the true function of writing which is to convey ideas. This means focusing on **what** the child has written, not **how** it was written. It's usually wise to ignore minor errors, particularly at the stage when your child is just getting ideas together.

Don't you write it! Don't write a paper for your child that will be turned in as his/her work. Never rewrite a child's work. Meeting a writing deadline, taking responsibiltiy for the finished product, and feeling ownership of it are important parts of writing well.

Praise. Take a positive approach and say something good about your child's writing. Is it accurate? Descriptive? Thoughtful? Interesting? Does it say something?



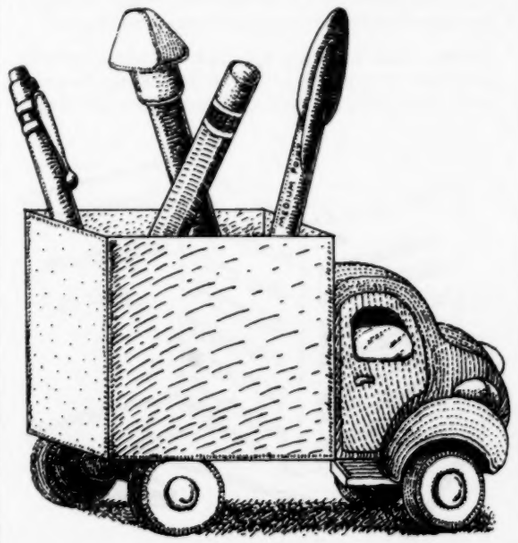
Things To Do

Make it real. Your child needs to do real writing. It's more important for the child to write a letter to a relative than it is to write a one-line note on a greeting card. Encourage the child to write to relatives and friends. Perhaps your child would enjoy corresponding with a pen pal.

Suggest note-taking. Encourage your child to take notes on trips or outings and to describe what (s)he saw. This could include a description of nature walks, a boat ride, a car trip, or other events that lend themselves to note-taking.

Brainstorm. Talk with your child as much as possible about his/her impressions and encourage the child to describe people and events to you. If the child's description is especially accurate and colorful, say so.

Encourage keeping a journal. This is excellent writing practice as well as a good outlet for venting feelings. Encourage your child to write about things that happen at home and school, about people (s)he likes or dislikes and why, things to remember or things the child wants to do. Especially encourage your child to write about personal feelings—pleasures as well as disappointments. If the child wants to share the journal with you, read the entries and discuss them—especially the child's ideas and perceptions.



Write together. Have your child help you with letters, even such routine ones as ordering items from an advertisment or writing to a business firm. This helps the child to see firsthand that writing is important to adults and truly useful.

Use games. There are numerous games and puzzles that help a child to increase vocabulary and make the child more fluent in speaking and writing. Remember, building a vocabulary builds confidence. Try crossword puzzles, word games, anagrams and cryptograms designed especially for children. Flash cards are good, too, and they're easy to make at home.

Suggest making lists. Most children like to make lists just as they like to count. Encourage this. Making lists is good practice and helps a child to become more organized. Boys and girls might make lists of their records, tapes, baseball cards, dolls, furniture in a room, etc. They could include items they want. It's also good practice to make lists of things to do, schoolwork, dates for tests, social events, and other reminders.

Encourage copying. If a child likes a particular song, suggest learning the words by writing them down—replaying the song on your stereo/tape player or jotting down the words whenever the song is played on a radio program. Also encourage copying favorite poems or quotations from books and plays.

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NIE's strategies for helping children learn to write well are helping youngsters throughout the country. We hope they will help your child.

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"Parents are our children's first and most important teachers; classroom teachers are parents' trustees."

William J. Bennett,
Secretary of Education